

Adrienne Rich

Challenging Authors

Karen F. Stein



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Adrienne Rich

CRITICAL LITERACY TEACHING SERIES:
CHALLENGING AUTHORS AND GENRES

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Adrienne Rich

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With gratitude to

Adrienne Rich (1929–2012)

Joan Joffe Hall

Poets, teachers, feminists

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My partner, Hugh McCracken, provided encouragement and understanding as the final stages of the book unfolded.

ABBREVIATIONS

Atlas	<i>An Atlas of the Difficult World</i>
Arts	<i>Arts of the Possible</i>
BBP	<i>Blood, Bread, and Poetry</i>
CEP	<i>Collected Early Poems</i>
CP	<i>Collected Poems</i>
CW	<i>A Change of World</i>
Dark	<i>Dark Fields of the Republic</i>
Dream	<i>The Dream of A Common Language</i>
Diamond	<i>The Diamond Cutters</i>
Diving	<i>Diving into the Wreck</i>
Fact	<i>The Fact of a Doorframe</i>
HE	<i>A Human Eye</i>
Lies	<i>On Lies, Secrets, and Silence</i>
Midnight	<i>Midnight Salvage</i>
NL	<i>Necessities of Life</i>
OWB	<i>Of Woman Born</i>
PS	<i>Poems: Selected and New, 1950–1974</i>
School	<i>The School among the Ruins: Poems 2000–2004</i>
Snapshots	<i>Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law</i>
Telephone	<i>Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth</i>
Tonight	<i>Tonight No Poetry Will Serve</i>
TP	<i>Time's Power</i>
Will	<i>The Will to Change</i>
WFT	<i>What Is Found There</i>
WP	<i>A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far</i>
WWDA	“When We Dead Awaken”
YNL	<i>Your Native Land, Your Life</i>

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich: Poet of the Oppositional Imagination

Power, place, politics, and personhood: these are the themes that drive American author Adrienne Rich's poetry and essays. Rich lived from 1929–2012 and wrote prolifically in the finest tradition of the humanities for most of her life. Her works examine the conditions of life in twentieth-century America; they ask important questions about how we should act, and what we should believe. For example, writing in 1972 during the Vietnam War Rich imagines a different way to deal with enemies; rather than waging war, she writes of transforming the warrior mentality ("The Phenomenology of Anger" in *Diving into the Wreck*).

Cary Nelson finds that Rich is "one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the 20th century." In her writing career that spanned more than sixty years Rich addressed, with sagacity and probing honesty, most of the significant issues of her lifetime, the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Author of twenty-one volumes of poetry, five non-fiction books of essays, and a book-length study of motherhood, Rich wrote passionately and powerfully about major concerns such as feminism, the Vietnam War, imperialism, Marxism, militarism, sexuality, lesbianism, poverty, racism, and other social issues. Her essays and poetry work in dialogue with each other, as she challenged poetic, social, cultural, and political assumptions and continued to ask the difficult questions of our time.

Hugh Seidman writes:

From the very first her genius has lain in the uncanny ability to resonate with our deepest concerns and desires via a charged, yet straightforward language. And, remarkably, the considerable moral pressure exerted by her work has never been compromised by a sacrifice of the "beautiful"—the lovely vowels, consonants, images, and metaphors of her emotional intelligence. (2006, p. 228)

Alice Templeton explains that "Rich's feminism challenges romantic ideology's assumptions about the priority and universality of self-consciousness [as she questions] what poetry means in the contemporary world, what transformative powers poetry has, and whether poetry can *truly* renew our lives, not simply anesthetize us or resign us by means of symbolic reconciliation" (emphasis in original, 1994, p. 23).

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For Rich, the feminist slogan “the personal is political” (as it was originally invoked as a way to hear women’s previously untold stories) rang true. She led an examined life, thinking and writing about the personal and political issues and events she experienced and learned about. Her poetry, essays, and activism were organically intertwined with her life and her own personal and political transformations. She has written that she learned about issues through writing poetry.

Daughter of a Jewish father and Episcopalian mother, she grew up in a secular, highly cultured family. She married a Jewish man, the economist Alfred Haskell Conrad (ne Cohen), and eventually came to appreciate her own family’s links to Judaism and to self-identify as Jewish, as documented in her poem “Sources” and the related essay “Split at the Root” (1983). She became active in the progressive organization, the New Jewish Agenda, and co-founded its journal, *Bridges*. When she became a mother of three sons she analyzed the meanings of white middle-class American motherhood in her non-fiction study *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). She left her traditional marriage and later formed a longstanding intimate partnership with Jamaican-American author Michelle Cliff (1946–2016).

In many ways Rich’s life and early work parallels the political and emotional trajectory of the second wave of feminism, of which she is a leading theorist.¹ In the mid-1950s and early 1960s she experienced depression and ennui similar to “the problem without a name” chronicled by Betty Friedan in her 1963 analysis of white middle-class American women’s lives in *The Feminine Mystique*.

Rich’s first book, *A Change of World* (1951), winner of the Yale Younger Poets Award, expressed anxiety in the face of change, a fervent wish to close the doors in the face of oncoming storms, and to shut oneself into a safe place. Over time Rich came to accept, to document, to interpret, and especially to call for change, as she became a public intellectual and social critic. More than most twentieth century poets Rich engaged with social and political theories, and formulated theoretical essays as well as poetry.

The Civil Rights, New Left, and Feminist (or, as Rich preferred, women’s liberation) movements provided analyses of social injustice that gave young Rich, along with many women, an insight into women’s disempowerment in relation to job possibilities, salaries, housework, child care, and other issues. Many women came to feminism from their work in the Civil Rights movement, just as their late-nineteenth-century foremothers had similarly become aware of their own disempowerment as women through their organizations in support of the abolition of slavery. The second wave feminist political analysis generated widespread anger which blazed in women’s personal lives and in their literature. Rich’s anger informs many of her poems in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), *Leaflets* (1969), *The Will to Change* (1971) and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). Anger propelled many women to various forms of action ranging from consciousness-raising groups to political activism. Women shared supportive networks and formed organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and more radical groups

to press for changes and to share their stories. Robin Morgan edited *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (1970), a book named by the New York Public Library “one of the one hundred most influential books of the twentieth century.” Feminist journals and small presses were established to publish work by women. Adrienne Rich was an important participant in this movement. In fact, in the middle of her career she was acclaimed as the “unofficial poet laureate of feminism’s second wave” (Gilbert Homegirls, p. 301). Along with her partner Michelle Cliff she co-edited the lesbian feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom* from 1981–1984. Rich points out that the energy and imagination of the women’s liberation movement brought about new communal organizations such as rape crisis centers, and women’s shelters (Arts, 1997). Among feminists, optimism, even euphoria, replaced—for a time—the previous depression, ennui, and anger. It seemed that the power of women united for change could transform society. Many of Rich’s poems in *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981) reflect this optimism and exhilaration. However, while feminism has made many gains, it has not yet succeeded in bringing about the sweeping cultural and political transformations for which many of its adherents still remain hopeful. And conservative reaction to the feminist agenda has eroded some of the gains.

But feminism is not a monolithic political program. Its tenets and goals are many, varied, and evolving. Although at the start of second wave feminism in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s it had claimed to be unitary, to speak for all women, mainstream feminists paid scant attention to women of color, lesbians, working women, and third world women. And there were conflicts, disagreements, and different factions (lesbian, liberal, radical, socialist, separatist) within the feminist movement. Feminists of color had been forming their own organizations and critiquing white feminists for largely ignoring them. In the 1980s feminists began to theorize and to organize on behalf of an expanded, more diverse constituency. Consequently, the very idea of a unitary subject position, or simple, coherent, personal identity, was fractured. We are all situated in a range of cultural, social, and economic positions shaped by multiple discourses, just as Rich acknowledges—particularly in “Sources,” the related essay “Split at the Root,” and in the poems of *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986)—the different discourses that help to construct her identity. The texts she subsequently wrote are more inclusive, encompassing a broader vision of her audience and of the subjects she would address.

Many feminists have debated about the root causes of injustice and inequality: is the patriarchy—male control of institutions—the basic problem, or is capitalism—private control of the means of production—the basic problem? In what ways are both of these systems intertwined? Starting in the 1980s Rich turned to the ideas of Karl Marx, especially as explicated and developed by Raya Dunayevskaya, to broaden her understanding. Her poetry and essays then began to focus on broader social justice issues. She later explained that she did not set out specifically to address political conditions but that these subjects arose out of her own experience

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as she felt threatened by the destructive excesses of capitalism and the backlash against feminism when the US became more conservative during the Reagan years (interview with Rachel Spence, 1999).

While much criticism has been written about Rich's early works, few books assess her later poetry and even fewer look at the full scope of her career.² This book attempts to fill that gap. This book intends to explore Rich's poetic and personal journey, from dutiful follower of poetic and cultural traditions to challenging questioner and critic, from passivity to activism, from author of traditional verse to self-proclaimed "poet of the oppositional imagination" (Arts, p. 8).

A study of her life and works reveals a powerful thinker passionately analyzing and evaluating central issues. Change, a word that recurs often in her early work, is a hallmark of her career. As her ideas evolved her poetry evolved as well, in both style and subject matter. Early poems cower in the face of change, while later poems and essays welcome—indeed, demand—the transformative possibilities of change. As suggested by the title poem of her book *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), she delved deeply into the serious questions of life in twentieth century America. She wrote ground-breaking and astute cultural criticism, and, as a result, she was often a center of controversy. In an important study of Rich's work, Liz Yorke writes: "Always a provocative voice, her words challenged, warned, wrestled with and reflected on the major cultural and political issues of our times. Her passionate effort to transform the field of social and cultural politics has taken her further and beyond many of her own [original] boundaries" (1997, p. 132).

I have had a longstanding admiration for Rich and her work. The prospect of writing a dissertation about her poetry was the lure that led me to begin study at the University of Connecticut for my doctorate degree. The lively academic environment helped to shape my thinking about literature. My dissertation, *Home and Wanderer: Transformations of the Self in Adrienne Rich's Poetry* (1982) analyzed her use of home imagery, and focused on how the traditional myth of the heroic journey—usually enacted by a man—was inflected through a woman's vision. My dissertation covered all the poetry Rich had published until 1981. After that date she subsequently published eleven more books of poetry, five books of theory and criticism, and co-edited two journals. Much of the material in this book about Rich's first ten books of poetry is derived (or quoted) from my dissertation. I have made additions, deletions, and emendations to this material, but chose to leave a substantial part of it unchanged, as it speaks from the standpoint of a type of feminist critical thinking that I shared during the early development of second wave feminism, at a time when Rich was writing her most overtly feminist and lesbian poetry. In my first course at UConn (a course, by the way, which began on a January day in 1978 when a blizzard engulfed the Northeast) I wrote a paper that became the start of my dissertation. I studied under Professor Joan Joffe Hall who became my advisor and a mentor. I gratefully dedicate this book to her memory. Several years ago, through the encouragement of Paul Thomas, editor of this series, a profound

thinker and prolific writer himself, I undertook to continue my study of Adrienne Rich's life and work and to write this book.

A CHALLENGING AUTHOR

This book participates in a series called "Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genres." I'd like to explore that topic here. First, let's consider briefly some of the particular challenges that Rich confronted. She faced many of them bravely in her life and spoke of some of them in her poetry and prose. She suffered from severe rheumatoid arthritis which required several surgeries, was often painful and crippling, and which appears in only a few references in her poetry. The challenges of marriage and child-rearing that she faced as a wife and mother she shared more widely with her readers (in *Of Woman Born*). Undoubtedly, for someone growing up in a conventional family in the U. S. in the decades before the advent of second-wave feminism it was surely a challenge to acknowledge oneself as a lesbian. I hope that a full biography, at some future date when more of the source material is available, will explore both Rich's challenges and her successes, and delineate her responses to them.

In many ways Adrienne Rich is a challenging author for us, her readers, to read, learn about, and teach. On the simplest level we face the challenge of reading and assimilating her substantial output, for she wrote prolifically in both poetry and prose. Then there is the challenge of comprehending and appreciating her work intellectually and aesthetically because of its complexity, its technical brilliance, its wide-ranging allusiveness, and its densely layered imagery and nuances. Moreover, once we think we have grasped her work in one or two books, we confront new challenges in others, for her style changed repeatedly over the decades of her writing career. Some of her works remain puzzling, especially those in the period I term her "late style" (borrowing from Peter Erickson's discussion of *Midnight Salvage*). Next, most of her poems and prose directly challenge widely accepted ideas and practices. She catalogues a history of injustices that our textbooks often omit or relegate to footnotes and that our public rhetoric usually ignores. She formulates profound critiques of fundamental institutions such as motherhood, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Furthermore, her work is often intended to challenge its readers personally, through the insistence on understanding, self-reflection, responsibility, and action that it demands of us. I have noticed that the word "challenge" appears frequently in studies of her work (for example in the words I have written here and in two of the quotes I have included in this brief introduction). Many of her works have remained controversial. Reviews, books, and articles of appraisal and criticism analyze, praise, condemn, or critique her works. Another aspect of the challenge facing those who read or study Rich is that to understand her work and the major contributions she has made to literature and to political thinking it is useful to understand the political and social contexts of the long period of time during which

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she was writing. This book aims to guide students, teachers, and general readers as they read, learn about, and/or teach her work.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

This book will follow the full trajectory of Rich's work and assess her importance as a thinker, social critic, and poet. Through close reading I will elucidate the evolution of her social and political thought to reveal how her prose and poetry articulate her vision. Recurring themes in Rich's poetry and thought that I will trace through her evolving work are the themes of change and response to it, of home and journey, and her probing explorations of feminism and Marxism. She continually wrestled with questions of language. She asked: how can women forge a "common language," a language that will do justice to women's experience when the English language has been androcentric, shaped by the myths and experiences of men? What happens to language when the rhetoric of advertisements, political slogans, and media "sound bites" degrade and devalue the language we hear repeatedly? What happens to language when people deliberately promulgate misinformation and lies? What are the impediments and barriers to finding or creating a common language? How can we communicate more honestly and fully, avoiding "lies, secrets, and silence?"

The second chapter of this book will provide a brief overview of Rich's life, drawing from her published writings and from published and unpublished materials collected in the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Some of the numerous documents—including some of Rich's diaries and correspondence—at the Schlesinger Library will remain sealed until a future date, so we must wait some time for the research that will make possible a much-needed full biography.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters will consider Rich's poetry, addressing each of her books in chronological order. At the start of my discussion of each book I will first provide a very brief overview of the American political and social context during the period Rich was composing the poetry in that book; second I will summarize the book's critical reception; and third, I will proceed to discuss the poems in that book.

Chapter Three: Early Poems will consider poems that she wrote from 1950–1970 and later published in *Collected Early Poems* (1993). Although the word "change" occurs frequently in early poems, the attitude toward change has shifted dramatically as we shall see, moving from fear and resistance to acceptance and welcoming of change.

Chapter Four: Later Poems, Part One, will consider poetry Rich wrote between 1971–1981. This period saw the flowering of Rich's feminist period, which produced what Claudia Rankine terms "some of Rich's most memorable and powerful poems" (CP, p. xliii).

Chapter Five: Later Poems, Part Two, looks at poetry published between 1984 and 2012. These poems reflect her strong commitment to social justice, as she became

a kind of American conscience in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Muriel Rukeyser, and Allen Ginsberg.

Chapter Six will address Rich's prose writing. As she became a public intellectual and social critic, she engaged with social and political theories, and formulated theoretical essays as well as political poetry. She read avidly and continually to deepen her understanding. She found in the interconnections of feminism, Marxism, and Judaism the values of social justice that shaped her political outlook, her writing, and her activism. She was frequently invited to contribute essays to book collections, to review the work of other authors, to participate in panel discussions, and to deliver talks to academic and civic groups. These invitations resulted in essays that appear in several volumes of her collected essays. Additionally, Rich published selections from her journals in *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993). This chapter will assess her prose writing that includes astute analyses of major women writers such as poets Emily Dickinson, Muriel Rukeyser, and Judy Grahn, and Marxist theorist Raya Dunayevskaya. I will also examine her significant contributions to feminist theory. In her ground-breaking and controversial book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* she delves into the meanings of motherhood in history and contemporary life. Her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience" remains a feminist classic. Describing her intellectual journey in the Foreword to *Arts of the Possible* (2000), a collection of her essays, Rich writes that she began "as an American optimist" and became "an American skeptic." She concludes: "Perhaps just such a passionate skepticism, neither cynical nor nihilistic, is the ground for continuing" (*Arts*, pp. 8–9).

Chapter Seven will offer material related to further study and teaching of Rich's life and work. Rich was often a spokesperson for her time. Discussion of her writings about education will form the center of this chapter. The chapter will offer a brief list of current pedagogical ideas, and provide lists of print and web resources on teaching. One section will contain resources on Rich such as interviews.

Chapter Eight, Resources, will provide information about sources for further research and study.

Chapter Nine, the conclusion, will attempt to sum up Rich's long career.

According to Liz Yorke "her strategic re-visionary mythmaking calls powerfully to others—men and women—engaged in the struggle against injustice, and she continues to enlarge the range, the process and the resonances of her wide-ranging politics of accountability, so as to forge alliances between women, and between women and men, despite their differences" (1997, p. 142). Cheri Colby Langdell asserts "Adrienne Rich is one of America's most outspoken, brilliant, and accomplished poets, widely known at home and internationally both as a poet of extraordinary range and verbal prolixity, and as a keen theoretical mind at the vanguard of critical theory" (2004, p. 4).

After Rich chose Cathy Park Hong's book *Dance Dance Revolution* (2008) for the Barnard Women Poets Prize, the two met for lunch in New York City. Hong was impressed by the older poet's warmth and genuine curiosity: Rich was eager to